

Virginia Occupational Therapy Association Grassroots Advocacy Guide

Introduction

This grassroots guide is designed to refresh many members' grassroots knowledge and skills and to introduce some members to the advocacy process.

There are several keys to getting any legislation passed:

1. Gaining the support of critical legislators in the right positions in the General Assembly. Our key legislators include members of the House Health, Welfare, and Institutions (HWI) committee, particularly the Health subcommittee, and the Senate Education and Health committee.
2. The second key is speaking with one voice—a united front will affect both legislators and the public to a greater degree.

Read on for the basics of becoming an effective grassroots advocate—learn how to be the ideal advocate and hone your skills in effective communication with legislators.

The Ideal Grassroots Activist

General Assembly delegates are citizens too. They have day jobs or are retired. They hold a stake in the general welfare of the state just as we do. Being a delegate is likely only a small portion of their income as they are only compensated approximately \$17,000 per year.

Legislators are in the position to create policy, raise money, allocate funds for public education, and make the laws by which we live, work, and play. Conversely, we are in the position to elect them. Our vote matters to them. Especially on a state level, legislators must listen to their constituents in the hopes of re-election.

Legislators vote on a wide range of issues during each session of the General Assembly. Legislators are rarely experts in the matter of the law they must vote on. They count on their constituents and lobbyists to provide the information they need to make an informed decision. As an advocate, you are in the position to provide them with much needed information that will influence their positions.

A great grassroots activist does their research on delegates. They know their hometown, church, or some other bit of important information that can be used as a connection to increase their visibility and influence with a delegate. Knowing a particular delegates background in occupational therapy will help give you guidance on how much detail that delegate will need when you contact them. Your experience provides information on the subject from the perspective of a trained professional. Good grassroots activists aim to become a legislator's resource when it comes to this information.

Grassroots activists also work to get their legislators re-elected or elected, as the case may be. As an activist it is expected that you participate in all aspects of the political world. You can contribute money to campaigns and/or agree to work the polls, distribute literature, walk the beat, and make phone calls on behalf of the legislator/candidate. Keeping a pro-OT legislator in office is just as important as getting their vote when it a bill is on the table.

Advocacy Skills

Communication with state legislators is not so different from speaking to a regular person. However,

there are a few rules that can help you avoid mistakes and embarrassment.

- **Try to find out as much as you can about your elected officials before your visits.** You have one Delegate and one Senator who represents you at the state level. Ideally, you should see both. Find out what committees they sit on and whether they hold any leadership positions. You can find out information about the legislator by looking at his or her webpage, which can be accessed through the General Assembly website: <http://viriniageneralassembly.gov/>
- **If the person you are lobbying does not sit on a committee addressing health,** their knowledge of the issue is likely limited. Explain the issue thoroughly and ask for a vote when the issue comes to the floor.
- **Be prepared. Know your topic.** You are the health professional and you know more about OTs and OTAs and occupational therapy than most legislators. Organize your thoughts in advance; divide up points among all those who are attending so that all points are made and repetition is minimized; and keep your presentation relatively short.
- **Talk with your legislators early.** You want to be any other parties to the punch. Share your information before anyone else gets the chance. Late summer through November is the best time to contact your legislators if you are advancing or opposing an issue that is bound to surface in the General Assembly session. The closer legislators get to the session's start in January, the less time they have and the harder it is to get appointments. You want your opinion to be heard clearly and without the distraction of session.
- **Present both sides of the issue while highlighting why your position is good public policy.** You will want to advance a position that addresses the critical role that the OT and OTA plays in restoring mobility, activities of daily living, and prevention of complications. Opposing parties will attempt to minimize any points you make. In order to be received as a source of good information, you must preempt others by detailing both sides of the argument. It is better to acknowledge other positions and argue against them before those issues are raised by others. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!
- **Your legislator will have questions.** You should be able to field any questions that the legislator asks. They ask for two reasons: more information and to get an idea of whether or not you are a worthy source of information. Admit if you are unsure of an answer, lay out a plan for how you will find the answer, and follow up immediately. The VOTA leadership is always happy to help answer any questions.
- **Be prepared with some anecdotes.** Statistics and studies are useful but only go so far in convincing a legislator to vote a particular way. Appeal to your legislator with compelling stories that clearly demonstrate your position. Use your personal perspective to detail the work that the OTA does and how it is essential to restoring health and preventing complications.
- **Stick to the issue.** Keep your message simple and related to the topic at hand. If there are other issues that you would like to bring to your legislators attention, do it at a different time. You do not want to convey a confusing agenda.
- **Do not debate your legislator on other issues like taxes or transportation.** Avoid contentious topics and stick to your original goal.
- **Always be completely honest.** Your future credibility with a legislator depends on honest and accurate information. You may be a source of information for a legislator, but they will fact check. You should be

knowledgeable and passionate enough that the facts, as you present them, stand on their own without any tweaks.

- **If your legislator doesn't agree with your position, pleasantly agree to disagree.** Ask if there is any information you could provide that would change his or her mind. Do not get angry or threaten the legislator in any way (i.e. won't vote for you). Should you need to present another position to them in the future, it is best that you do not sever good relations.
- **Do not make any contribution to the legislator or candidate's campaign during your visit.** Do not promise *anything* in return for the legislator's agreement with your position. Simply put, this is a bribe and very illegal.
- **Listen carefully to the legislator's statement of his position on this issue.** Legislators are masters of political spin and appeasement. Do not construe general statements to be support. Ask directly (i.e. Will you vote for this licensure bill?) and then listen carefully to the answer. Let them know you will keep in touch, will send them a copy of materials in support of your position (if you have them). Offer yourself as an open source of information throughout the process.

How to contact your legislators

Much of what you need for contacting your legislator can be found online.

Here are some helpful links:

- <http://viriniageneralassembly.gov/>: This is the General Assembly homepage. Resources include: state budget, constitution, laws, and regulations.
- <http://whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov/>: If you do not know who your legislators are, click on this URL.

Staying abreast of activities during the General Assembly session

Virginia's General Assembly meets yearly in the winter. In the even years, in addition to acting on bills, the legislature deliberates and votes on the budget that is submitted to them by the Governor. The odd years are shorter sessions of 45 days and the legislature's job is to act on bills and approve amendments to the state's biennial budget. Each year the legislature acts on approximately 4000 bills in the short time they meet.

Knowing the brevity of the legislative sessions will help you understand that citizen advocates have little time to educate their legislators and advise them how to act on bills. ***When a bill is to be acted on by committee or the full body (either House or Senate), VOTA members have approximately 24 hours to make their opinions known.***

Given that narrow window, you will be notified by email if you are on the VOTA membership list about what actions you should take and how to take them. During the legislative session, you should check your emails daily. Your legislative committee makes every attempt to inform you only when action is necessary.

Tips for Advocacy by Phone (preferred for issues that require a yes or no action) **(Support or oppose)**

When the General Assembly is in session (from approximately January 10 – March 10), the House of

Delegates and Senate of Virginia jointly operate a toll-free, intrastate telephone message center to accept calls from citizens of the Commonwealth wishing to express an opinion on legislation. The messages are received by the center and will be relayed to the members' offices as requested. You may call the Constituent Viewpoint operators at **(800) 889-0229** (outside Richmond) or **698-1990** (Richmond area) to express your opinion on a legislative issue. The Constituent Hotline is open from 8:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday during the session.

When the General Assembly is not in session, you may call (804) 698-1500 for the House of Delegates Legislative Information Office and (804) 698-7410 for the Senate Legislative Information Office.

Tips for Advocacy by email (preferred if more explanation is necessary than yes or no)

During sessions, your email is read quickly for the following information:

- The bill number
- State that you are writing in support of the bill
- Your name and mail address (to determine which senator/delegate will receive your information)

Do not send emails to legislators other than your delegate or senator unless you have received specific directions from VOTA. Sometimes committee members of important committees receive emails from persons other than their constituents if an important bill is being heard in committee.

Email addresses of members of the General Assembly can be found at these addresses:

- Senate: <http://apps.lis.virginia.gov/sfb1/Senate/EmailList.aspx>
- House: <http://virginiageneralassembly.gov/house/members/members.php>

Tips for Advocacy by Snail Mail or Fax (not preferred)

Letters should be polite, brief and to the point--stating your stand, identifying the bill under discussion by number, urging action or amendments and your reasons; and giving your address and phone number.

During the General Assembly session, Delegates and Senators can be reached at their offices in the General Assembly Building in Richmond. When the General Assembly is not in session, Delegates and Senators can be reached at their district offices. Fax numbers are available through linking on the hyperlink to the email addresses (above).

Additional information

Appendix 1: Sample evaluation for lobbying day participation

Appendix 2: Summary of tips for lobbying

APPENDIX 1

Date: _____

Please fill this out form immediately following your appointment and return to office@vaota.org or by fax (804) 288-3551.

1. Name:
2. Legislator:
3. Was the legislator present? Yes No
 - a. If not, with whom did you meet? (Please list all names and staff positions)
4. What did you talk about?

5. How did they respond?

6. Did you refer to the VAOTA talking points? Yes No
7. Were you able to directly ask for support? Yes No
8. Comments:

Appendix 2

Communicating with Your Legislators: A Handy Primer*

Writing Your Legislator

1. Write your own senator or delegate.
2. Write when it is practical.
3. Be courteous and identify yourself as an OT, OTA, VOTA
4. member, and as a constituent. Give your full address.
5. Whenever possible, identify bills by number. Otherwise, clearly describe the measure.
6. Be informed about the issue and then write your own views/opinions from personal knowledge or experience. Form letters do not get the attention of the legislator.
7. Focus on one issue. Be brief, but write enough to be clear.
8. Give reasons for your position. Avoid professional jargon.
9. Ask questions that require a response.
10. Check spelling and grammar! A letter from an OTA is expected to be free of careless errors and sloppy sentence and paragraph structure.
11. Write legislators when they do something you approve of, even if just a simple thank-you.
12. Do not threaten legislators or pretend to wield vast political influence. Do not try to instruct your legislator on every issues that comes up

Telephoning Your Legislator

1. Give your name and full address.
2. Identify yourself and your organizational affiliation.
3. Speak directly to the senator or delegate, if possible.
4. Be brief and concise. Focus on one issue.
5. Indicate your position.
6. State that you are calling about the OTA licensure bill.

Before the General Assembly Session

1. Access the General Assembly website to identify your legislators: <http://viriniageneralassembly.gov>
2. Visit your senator and delegate at their home office.
3. Share the brochure that is part of this guide.
4. Motivate your friends and family to make contact with their senator or delegate.

Model Address

The Honorable _____(use full name) General Assembly Building

Richmond, VA 23219

Dear Senator/Delegate Smith:

Visiting Your Legislator

1. Make an appointment. (It is equally important to visit legislators when they are at home as it is when they are in the General Assembly session.)
2. Be prepared to talk on one or two issues.
3. Be on time.
4. Identify yourself as OT, OTA, and/or VOTA member and a constituent.
5. Briefly and concisely share your experiences and first-hand knowledge of education issues.

6. Leave written materials, if possible.
7. Offer to get more information, if needed.
8. Be willing to meet with the legislative aide if the legislator is unavailable.
9. Send a follow-up thank you note.

During the General Assembly Session

1. Identify legislation in which you are interested.
2. Follow the legislation through action of subcommittee and committee.
3. Find out your legislators' committee and subcommittee assignments.
4. Contact your legislator when legislation reaches their subcommittee, committee, or the floor. The General Assembly Constituent Viewpoint Hotline: 1-800-889-0229, in Richmond: 648-1990 (8:30a.m. – 5:00 p.m. during the session).
 - i. Email delegates:
 - ii. Del+ delegate's first initial+ last name@house.state.va.us
 - iii. Example: DelRBrink@house.state.va.us
 - iv. Email senators:
 - v. district#@sov.state.va.us
 - vi. Example: district28@sov.state.va.us

After the General Assembly Session

1. Write letters of appreciation to those who were helpful.

*Thanks to the Virginia Education Association for this primer.